

**Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (2017), *Decolonizing the University*. In *Knowledges Born in the Struggle Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*. New York: Routledge, pp. 219–239.**

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### **Brief Summary**

Santos' (2017) text *Decolonizing the University*, grapples with the quest for global cognitive justice, identifying ways in which knowledge is commodified and weaponized to further the projects of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy within the Western-centric university context and its extensions within the neoliberal state. In Santos' introduction, he notes two notable social struggles which impacted this kind of university system on a global level, namely, the bottom-up movement and, subsequently, the top-down movement. The first refers to a movement which although facilitated greater access to the diversity for a more diverse student body, maintained a Eurocentric curricula and faculty within universities (Santos, 2017, p. 219). The second refers to "self-inflicted authoritarianism" (p. 221), in which the university became utilized as a site to further the capitalist project through the commodification of educational institutions, knowledge acquisition and production (Santos, 2017, p. 220). The degradation produced by what remained static in the first movement and the grave expansion of the capitalist project in the second movement, mutually reinforcing the projects of university capitalism and university colonialism (Santos, 2017, p. 231). Grounded in the context of a larger movement calling for global social justice, led Santos to call for the emancipation of the university through a process of decolonization (Santos, 2017, p. 221).

Santos proposes that the decolonization of the Western-centered university would enact expansive processes of deconstruction, reparation and creation, providing particular attention to Mbembe's argument for the university to become an "open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism" (Santos, 2017, p. 235). In this vision, the *university* is: (i) decoupled from the rigidity (and fragility) of academic institutions; (ii) reimagined to transcend into other collective imaginaries that can realize the "cross-fertilization" of knowledge, including the

expansion of what is considered 'knowledge' and 'scientific'; (iii) pressed to challenge the practiced sociology of absences through the decolonization of epistemologies and the active amplification of a pedagogy of emergences; (iv) a site of plurilingualism in resistance to the (re)production of monolithic, lingual domination (Santos, 2017, pp. 235–237). These processes dialogue with other social and cultural decolonization struggles as part of a wider movement for political emancipation (Santos, 2017, p. 222).

### **Critical Analysis**

Santos' text calls not just for the reformation of the Western-centric university and, thus, of institutional education but for the radical transformation of knowledge production. To showcase the shortcomings of the institutional university, Santos begins the text by noting historical movements that have significantly impacted the university: the bottom-up and the top-down movements; both of which have been described above. The use of these two examples in particular certainly bare historical value to understand the opposing struggles the university has experienced. Yet, it also serves to highlight the limitations of reformation. The first, the bottom-up movement, serves to both describe the expansion of the student body beyond its elitist, largely homogenous composition. Yet, in noting what had changed (access to the university for other groups), Santos also highlights what remained the same: the curricula and the university staff. Beginning the text by unpacking this dimension is essential to understanding the limitations of reform. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, shares a poignant reflection of relevance to the astaticism of the bottom-up movement:

“The master narrative could make any number of adjustments to keep itself intact. Silence from and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing narrative” (1992, p. 50).

In describing the top-down movement, Santos also points to the fragility of the university in its ability to become utilized, manipulated and reshaped to meet the needs of urged by the commodification of education and the “marketization of knowledge” (Santos, 2017, p. 220). By behaving as a business, the university is rigid to business needs, conduct and bottom-lines; “strategies for maintaining the silence” (Morrison, 1992, p. 50). This dimension is imperative

to our understanding of the perpetual challenges faced in the rise of global capitalism, even in the face of urgent, but insufficient and tenuous reforms.

Santos' calls for the *decolonizing* of the university, begging careful consideration to understanding what is meant by his use of the term. How does Santos' use of the term *decolonization* distinguish itself from the transformation potential of other social justice projects? Santos' text explores processes, using several specific examples, to note the transformative actions that decolonizing the Western-centric university would require. He notes that these processes would take into account: (i) access to the university (professionally & academically); (ii) design and selection of disciplines; (iii) teaching methodologies; (iv) institutional governance; and (v) the relationship between society and the university (Santos, 2017, p. 221). Santos argues that these five dimensions would be approached with: (i) commitment to intersectional decolonization to not (re)produce domination; (ii) dialogue/coordination with other social/cultural decolonization struggles; (iii) inclusive movement focusing on collective struggle; (iv) understanding the challenges of change; and (v) the rejection of Western historical revisionism (Santos, 2017, pp. 221–222).

Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that in order for the use of decolonization to distinguish itself from its use as a harmful metaphor, it must be grounded in a meaningful process that has specific wants and requirements (p. 2). Bhabra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu (2018) note that decolonization is an approach to “thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study... and purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis” (p. 2). When used as a metaphor, decolonization becomes a synonym for other justice-driven lingo; it is violently appropriated feeding into existing frameworks (Tuck, Eve; Yang, 2012, p. 3). No matter what those frameworks are, the use of decolonization as a metaphor ultimately “recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future... [and] represent settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation”, ultimately voiding decolonization of its deliberate political aim (Tuck, Eve; Yang, 2012, pp. 3–4).

Ahmed (2012) argues that “a political question becomes the extent to which we can separate ourselves from the words we use” (p. 75). According to Tuck & Yang (2012), decolonization is

a unique, difficult, unsettling process that, as stated by Fanon, “never takes place unnoticed” (p. 7); perhaps what Morrison (1992) would call “strategies for breaking [the silence]” (p. 50). While Santos’ reflects along the terms noted by Tuck & Yang (2012), as well as Bhabra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu (2018), I argue that his argument faces its shortcoming in examining the role of identity. Santos’ (2017) notes that despite deferring methods, the object of decolonization is not just the colonizer but also the colonized; an effort so expansive that it requires “alliances among different social groups” committed to not “inverting” colonialism (p. 222). To this end, Santos’ states that it is of greater importance to understand where people stand politically in the struggle to decolonize, rather than focus on their identity “as it presents itself naturalized by the dominant social relations” (Santos, 2017, p. 222).

This solidarity-driven, blanket inclusion of settlers within the decolonization process raised particular concerns in reflection of Tuck & Yang’s (2012) *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*. Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that, in a settler context, while it’s imperative to expand involvement of individuals to counter the damages of colonialism, “this joining cannot be too easy, too open, too settled” as it “neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict”, instead potentially nurturing performativity and innocence (p. 3). Solidarity is a potential site for misunderstanding; fetishizing the ‘native’ to gain “aboriginal closeness” (Tuck, Eve; Yang, 2012, p. 8). Much like efforts to bring so-called diversity to the university setting, decolonizing becomes about producing “the right image”, presuming that “perception is the problem” in which the focus becomes “changing perception of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 34). Ahmed (2012) argues that this performance reproduces whiteness because it facilitates its existence while diminishing its perception. This is the metaphor of decolonization in action. Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that innocence, then, is able to “reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p. 4), perpetuating a state of unaccountability and cultivating “contradictory decolonial desires” (p. 7) by falsely equating experiences of personal exclusion with structural oppression; preserving the positioning of white people as both “the oppressed and never an oppressor, and as having an absence of experience of oppressive power” (p. 9).

This blind spot in Santos’ text deserves greater care in consideration of the depths of decolonization. Tuck & Yang (2012) call for the recognition of incommensurability; “an

acknowledgement that decolonization will require a change in the order of the world” not in a necessary ‘inversion’ of dominance but, rather, the “dismantling of the imperial metropole” in which reconciliation of any kind is not an objective (p. 31). Santos’ call to unite beyond identity to the task of decolonization does not take into full account a major complexity of decolonization: settlers’ potential role in reproducing dominance through a form of immediate, potentially unconsented reconciliation with the ‘colonized’ in the name of a greater struggle.

## **Bibliography**

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